

**A TEXTBOOK AND ITS AUTHOR:
THE PRE-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIAN TRADITION
AND SOVIET INNOVATIONS
IN NIKOLAY M. NIKOLSKY'S WORK***

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In this paper, the author analyses Professor N. M. Nikolsky's 1933 school textbook on ancient history. Nikolsky introduced a number of interesting innovations in his work uncharacteristic of scholarship of the time. He was able to combine the pre-revolutionary school tradition and elements of Marxism. Equally, the textbook matched the level of historical scholarship of the first third of the twentieth century. Nikolsky's innovations were almost completely rejected in the 1930s because of the replacement of the pre-revolutionary Marxist tradition with Soviet Marxism. As a result, his contribution to the renewal of the national system of teaching ancient history has been underestimated. Many of his ideas were not unpromising, but simply unfinished. This essay discusses the rivalry between N. M. Nikolsky and V. V. Struve, which the former lost.

Keywords: Soviet historiography; Marxism; N. M. Nikolsky; Soviet school; Soviet teaching, history of the ancient world.

Автор останавливается на сюжете появления первого советского школьного учебника по древней истории, написанного в 1933 г. историком религии и востоковедом Н. М. Никольским (1877–1959). Основная идея статьи заключается в сопоставлении этого издания с дореволюционной традицией гимназических учебников; этот анализ дополнен разбором особенностей личной и научной биографии автора учебника. Показано, что Никольский совершил ряд решительных инноваций как с точки зрения структуры, так и с точки зрения содержания исследования, которые гораздо больше соот-

* The study was supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), as part of the research project (No. 19–09–00125) *Unification of Narrative in Soviet Historiography of World History: Transformation of Views and Scientific Creativity*.

** Citation: Krikh, S. (2019). A Textbook and Its Author: The Pre-Revolutionary Russian Tradition and Soviet Innovations in Nikolay M. Nikolsky's Work. In *Quaestio Rossica*. Vol. 7, № 4. P. 1299–1308. DOI 10.15826/qr.2019.4.439.

Цитирование: Krikh S. A Textbook and Its Author: The Pre-Revolutionary Russian Tradition and Soviet Innovations in Nikolay M. Nikolsky's Work // *Quaestio Rossica*. Vol. 7. 2019. № 4. P. 1299–1308. DOI 10.15826/qr.2019.4.439.

ветствовали уровню развития мировой науки о древности в первой трети XX в., чем последующие версии того же учебника, созданные коллективом авторов под руководством А. В. Мишулина. Эти инновации были по большей части отвергнуты точно так же, как к середине 1930-х гг. оказалась почти полностью отвергнута и дореволюционная марксистская традиция, замененная советским марксизмом. Соответственно, и самого Никольского нужно оценивать как русского марксиста, раскрывшего свой талант в начале советского периода, но вынужденного постепенно трансформировать свои взгляды на протяжении 1930-х гг.

Ключевые слова: советская историография; марксизм; Н. М. Никольский; советская школа; история Древнего мира.

In 1933, in a hurry to fulfill an order from the State Publishing House, the historian Nikolay M. Nikolsky (1877–1959) wrote the first Soviet school textbook on ancient history [Никольский, 1933б]. The fate of this work was unenviable – although the textbook appeared in the general schools of the Soviet Union, the print run was limited, and children were only taught by this textbook for a few years; it also received extremely negative reviews from other historians [Ковалёв, Струве, Толстов]. The book did indeed have many shortcomings, both in the content and the style. However, it has been mainly evaluated from the point of view of the subsequent Soviet tradition. After 1933, the text was given to a group of authors to be rewritten: as a result, it was changed beyond recognition [Ковалёв, Мишулин, Никольский, Сванидзе]. Neither on the cover of the updated edition nor within it is it possible to find a single mention of the original author [Мишулин]. As a result, the first version of the textbook looks like an abortive early experiment with little relevance to the future teaching of antiquity in Russia. But if consider the textbook from the standpoint of the pre-revolutionary Russian tradition in which Nikolsky's ideas were formed, then we will have the opportunity of gaining a more objective picture.

First, it is necessary to give some basic information about the author. Nikolay M. Nikolsky was born in Moscow in the family of Mikhail V. Nikolsky (1848–1917), who was at the forefront of Russian Assyriology and a lecturer at Moscow University. The son inherited an interest in biblical studies from his father. While the elder Nikolsky was distinguished by liberal views (hence his conflicts with university authorities), then his son was interested in Marxism from an early age and collaborated with the Bolsheviks from 1905; as such, he had no chance of receiving a post at any university in Tsarist Russia. Therefore, Nikolsky worked as a teacher in a gymnasium, although he continued to conduct biblical studies and published translations of foreign biblical scholars.

With the fall of the tsarist regime, the previous restrictions vanished. However, Nikolsky had to leave Moscow during the hungry years of the Civil War: he initially worked in Smolensk before taking a job at a newly formed university in Minsk, the capital of the new Byelorussian Soviet So-

cialist Republic. Now he could attain a university career: he received the title of academician of the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences and became a famous scholar after publishing a book about the history of the Russian Church, a classic work of Soviet historiography [Никольский, 1930].

So, by the early 1930s Nikolsky had not taught in schools for a long time: he admitted quite frankly that “I had to solve the problem (of writing the textbook. – S. K.) without being familiar with the pupils of the modern Soviet school. I worked for 19 years in an old pre-revolutionary school and I knew the consistency of its pupils, the level of their mental development and their interests, I knew how to handle them. I know the children of today not at school but at home; the present pupil is entirely unfamiliar to me” [Никольский, 1933а, с. 114]. It is still unknown whether any historians in Moscow or Leningrad tried to participate in the competition for the creation of the textbook. It is possible that all other potential authors were embarrassed by the “rush in which I had to write a textbook” [Там же, с. 116]. Realizing the impossibility of doing a good job in only a few months, they preferred the more convenient role of being harsh critics. This only emphasizes how interesting it is that Nikolsky, permanently living in Minsk, took up the matter when there were practically no precedents of this kind of work.

I must emphasize that this was almost the central point that determined the creation of the book. In the early 1930s, the authorities suddenly set historians the task of creating “stable” textbooks. Constant experimentation was undertaken in Soviet high schools throughout the 1920s. At this time, the history of antiquity was either not taught at all or was mentioned from time to time in small brochures from which textbooks were compiled (“unstable” textbooks). Only in 1927 did the publication of “workbooks” on social studies begin [Бущик, с. 219]. By “stable” textbooks, the state meant fully-fledged books for teaching in one subject: in this sense, the policy was a return to pre-revolutionary textbooks (which teachers and students continued to use not only in the 1920s, but also most of the 30s) [АРАН. Ф. 1577. Оп. 5. Д. 36. Л. 23].

So, although the Soviet Union had existed for a decade and a half by 1933, a *Soviet* experience of teaching ancient history in schools was virtually non-existent. A result of this state of affairs was a low level of interest in the history of traditional societies, which was triggered by the sense of renewal characteristic of revolutionary culture. Antiquity and the Middle Ages looked like deeply irrelevant periods that at best deserved a brief overview of their development from a Marxist perspective. Equally, early Soviet (pre-Stalinist) scholarship is generally difficult to characterize as *Soviet*: in essence, it continued pre-revolutionary trends, but with changing political poles. Although Marxism had changed from a peripheral to a dominant position, the very configuration of academic work did not change until 1929. In education, the situation was quite chaotic, with a large number of random experiments being held to find new methods: this indicates the absence of a Soviet teaching tradition at this stage. Obviously, Nikol-

sky did not have a Soviet background when he was writing his textbook. In the 1920s, textbooks on ancient history were oriented to older readers [Ковалев; Сергеев], but it is uncertain whether Nikolsky read them: there is no sign that they affected his attitudes when creating the textbook. In other words, the pre-revolutionary tradition was Nikolsky's main starting point. If we place his textbook in such a context, then we see several fundamental innovations.

First of all, Nikolsky introduced a whole section on primitive history and drastically increased the size of the section on the history of the East. The attitude to primitiveness (*pervobytnost'*) as pre-history still prevailed among scholars at that time. However, for Marxist sociology, the consideration of primitiveness as a *normal* historical era was an important component of the general claim to a holistic knowledge of the history of mankind. Pre-revolutionary publications had different positions: "The subject of history is [applicable to] only those peoples who have discovered the ability of development, [i. e.] *cultural* peoples" [ИВАНОВ, с. 7]. While Nikolsky was not the first to include a section on primitive society (such was available in Vipper's textbook, although it concerned only primitive Europe [Виппер, с. 1–17]), he made it comparable with other sections: this was an innovation that the subsequent Soviet tradition rejected.

No less important was the section on the history of the Ancient East. Pre-history, the East, Greece, and Rome received approximately equal shares in Nikolsky's book. This was a step against eurocentrism, long recognized as a problem in the scholarship of that time. Although inadequate by modern standards (where it is acknowledged that the history of the so-called 'eastern civilizations' is much longer than the Greco-Roman and no less eventful), Nikolsky's efforts to highlight this history with the limited knowledge available at the time were comparatively novel. While in Vinogradov's textbook the history of the East occupied about 8 % of the volume [Виноградов], in Nikolsky's it accounted for almost 25 %.

Pre-revolutionary textbooks adhered to a scheme of the description of the East which reflected the level of knowledge at the end of the nineteenth century: Egypt – Babylonia and Assyria – Israel and Phoenicia – Persia. Of course, this was no longer a story built on a purely biblical vision of the Middle Eastern ancient world, but it retained an orientation towards the Mediterranean: "About Chinese and Indian cultures, enough information has been related in Geography [a textbook]" [Виноградов, с. 3].

Although Nikolsky did not include India in his narrative, he wrote a section on China (albeit a very imperfect one). Guided by progress in Assyriology, he also changed the order of the story about ancient countries: Mesopotamia – Egypt – China. It is noteworthy that he did not name the first section either "Babylonia and Assyria" (probably due to biblical associations) or "Mesopotamia", but instead preferred the Russian loan translation *Dvurechie* (land of two rivers). In order to see how Nikolsky's textbook was more "progressive" or, more correctly, was better at taking into account achievements in scholarship (such as the five-volume book by E. Meyer,

which was reprinted at the beginning of the twentieth century [Meyer]), it should be compared with a textbook published in exile by M. I. Rostovtzeff [Ростовцев]. Both works were written by Russian intellectuals educated before the revolution and both were created when the tsar's censorship no longer existed. But Rostovtzeff's book contains only a few mentions of the Ancient East: what little is there is focused entirely on the Middle East. Rostovtzeff's decision to limit himself to only a most general overview of the ancient history of the Middle East arose from the fact that his main object of interests was always Greco-Roman society. Thus, if we consider the entire Russian post-revolutionary textbook tradition of textbooks, we see that it was Nikolsky who made the most decisive innovations in the narrative about the Ancient East.

In terms of content, Nikolsky did not create a rude economocentric narrative. Nonetheless, it should be recognized that his narrative is structured around the scheme "(sources) – natural conditions – technology – economy – political system – main events". Only after this (and based on previous content) do paragraphs about ideology and culture follow. Although Nikolsky represented religious life as very primitive, he gave a detailed account of it in two key cases – the ancient Greek religion and early Christianity [Никольский, 1933б, с. 129–131, 190–191].

The main characteristic of the 1933 textbook is its attempt to plot ancient history as not as a series of tales, but rather as a coherent narrative that unfolds according to a single plan. This is why Nikolsky does not include many of those golden historical anecdotes normally present in such textbooks. On the contrary, Nikolsky focused only on what seemed to him the most important things for forming the reader's understanding of the dynamics of Greek and Roman societies. Since most cultural baggage was present regarding the history of the classical world, it is in the sections on Greece and Rome that we can see how radical Nikolsky's decision was. For example, there is no description of the Battle of Thermopylae, and therefore the entire mythology of the "three hundred Spartans" is omitted.

In general, Nikolsky's contribution to updating the Russian system of teaching ancient history is underestimated, although he achieved less than might have been desired. Soon, many of his ideas were judged unsuccessful, although they were unfinished rather than futile. These ideas had no chance of being recognized outside the Soviet Union: traveling to Germany in the 1920s [Никольская 2013, с. 287], Nikolsky was known only as the author of a small number of publications on biblical studies in German. His activity at home might have led to an increase in fame abroad¹ were it not for the fact that the Soviet scholarly world became closed in the 1930s: stable correspondence with foreign scholars became suspicious and

¹ This assumption can be argued by the following fact. Even Nikolsky's small book on the psalms [Nikolsky, 1927] was consistently cited and is still mentioned in the bibliography on the religion of ancient Israel, for example: [Franken, p. 28, 38; Frey-Anthes, s. 6–7, 70, 90–92; Krapf, s. 159; Locke, p. 60–73; Tromp, p. 163, 164]. If Nikolsky's more solid works had been published in translation, they would have become part of international historiography.

extremely difficult. Therefore, the fate of his ideas depended solely on intra-Soviet trends, and they were not at all favorable for him.

During various Soviet discussions of the 1930s, Nikolsky had to emphasize that his understanding of eastern feudalism was different from Meyer's [НА ИИМК РАН. Ф. 2. Оп. 1933. Д. 28. Л. 48], although this influence was present both in the textbook and in a generalizing encyclopedic article [Никольский, 1927]. To reproach a historian for "bowing down" to Meyer (as the historian Alexander Mishulin put it [Там же. С. 47]) was a political, not a scholarly, attack: as such, Nikolsky could not admit that he was creatively transforming the ideas of the German historian, whose conception was characterized in the Soviet Union as "vivid evidence of the decay of bourgeois scholarship in the era of imperialism" [Пригожин, с. 7]. However, one might argue that a marxized Meyer seen through the prism of Nikolsky's work promised more for the progress of scholarship and education than a marxized Ilovaisky. Ilovaisky was the author of rather primitive gymnasium textbooks which had been the objects of irony in pre-revolutionary Russia [Иловайский]. The textbook edited by Mishulin looks exactly like such a book: it contains more mythology, historical anecdotes, and enumeration of the names of Roman emperors than any effort to provide a general vision.

So, why were many of innovations of the 1933 textbook later rejected? I have already written about one of the reasons: Nikolsky lost to Vasilii Struve in a dispute about the nature of ancient eastern societies [Крих]. After defeat in scholarship, the defeat in teaching shortly followed. However, we must go further: if new ideas were successful, they often remained in the Soviet narrative despite the tragic fates of their authors. Thus, the scheme of five socio-economic formations was developed by A. G. Prigogine, M. M. Zvibak, and S. N. Bykovsky, all of whom were subsequently branded as Trotskyists and vermin (*vrediteli*) [О вредительстве в области археологии и о ликвидации его последствий]: nonetheless, the scheme itself was soon legitimized in the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* (the "Short Course") (1938). Although Nikolsky lost the scholarly discussion, he was not repressed: so why were his ideas abandoned?

I suggest that the answer lies precisely in the specificity of Nikolsky's views and life. The 1933 textbook was created by a Russian intellectual whose views had been had formed before the revolution. He was a representative of the materialist movement in the Russian intelligentsia which acclaimed the revolution and (here Nikolsky's biographers are absolutely right [Никольская, 1970]) received much from the victory of Marxism. He became a university professor and a famous scholar; he was able to publish his studies on religion without regard to the tsar's censorship, an important fact given that he was extremely critical of religion. In the mid-1920s, Nikolsky was 45 years old: he was a mature researcher who was able to benefit from the favorable external circumstances. One may wonder whether the working conditions of the biblical historian in Minsk were comparable

with those in Moscow. However, Nikolsky clearly was one of the first and foremost scholars of Belarus (see, for example: [Фядосік]). I think that all of the above can be used as a psychological justification for the rather self-confident attempt to write a school textbook in a few months.

However, this impulse was exhausted, partially because it became irrelevant in the Stalinist era, with its peculiar restoration of the elements of tsarism and particular interpretation of Marxism. The paradox was that pre-revolutionary Russian Marxism [Леонтьева] was not Soviet Marxism or even a forerunner of it: there was no place for it in the new regime, where leftist ideology (world revolution, free labor, popular democracy) served as a cover for the set of conservative decisions which established the notorious socialism in a single country (centralization of management in scientific institutions, the revival of Russian nationalism, “purging”, and the formation of a new party bureaucracy) [Дубровский].

During the transitional period, many contemporaries could ignore these trends and seek creative approaches when implementing Marxist theory. Nikolsky's textbook was a belated consequence of these approaches. The historian (apparently quite sincerely) characterized Stalin in his textbook as “the best successor of Marx, Engels, and Lenin”, under whose leadership “the proletariat is building a classless communist society in our Union” [Никольский 1933б, p. 5]. Some indications in the memoirs of Nikolsky's second wife make it clear that his faith in the progressiveness of the Soviet system was soon subjected to serious tests, primarily related to the “purges” in the university and academic environment of Minsk [Никольская, 2013]. Nikolsky not only had to recreate the textbook but also his own selfhood. From the second half of the 1930s, he was a completely different scholar, a Soviet Marxist who knew how to confirm his every thought with a quote from the classics of Marxism-Leninism (see, for example: [АРАН. Ф. 1619. Оп. 1. Д. 104]). The pre-revolutionary Marxist tradition which produced the textbook of 1933 was completely rejected by the new Stalinist Marxism and its representatives. Those who wanted to stay in scholarship had to accept the new rules of the game.

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The article was submitted on 06.09.2019